

Texas Agricultural Extension Service

*People Helping People*

# FAJITAS

## South Texas

### Style



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## **Introduction**

Fajitas, indigenous to south Texas, have become popular throughout the state. Although Texans have enjoyed fajitas for a long time, this food—which began as mesquite-grilled beef rolled up in corn or flour tortillas—is not eaten in most parts of the United States because people are unaware of it. Many people have just never heard of fajitas.

In south Texas, certain foods remain distinctive despite the variety of cultures in that region. South Texas ranches provide an abundance of wild game, barbecues and country-style cooking. From Mexico come spices that give a pungent flavor to many foods. Europeans also brought their culture and cuisine to this region.

Fajita is Spanish for “little belt” or “sash,” and the piece of meat involved resembles a cummerbund. Fajitas (pronounced fah-hee-tuhs) are derived from the diaphragm muscle (outside beef skirt) on the interior surface of the short plate in the beef forequarter, or from the secondary flank muscle (inside beef skirt) from the interior portion of the flank in the hindquarter.

The resemblance of the diaphragm muscle (outside skirt) to a belt and its role of positioning the lungs and heart in an animal in the place where a belt would be worn led to use of the term skirt. Only four skirts per carcass—one in each short plate and one in each flank region—limits availability.

## **History**

Fajitas originated in the area bordered by Mexico to the south and west, the Nueces river to the north and the King Ranch (near Kingsville) to the east. Historically, in this region of south Texas, secrets are never readily told.

Hispanics in south Texas have been eating fajitas—as such—since the late 1930's. Often, beef skirts—along with other variety meats and by-products such as head, intestine and hide—were used as partial payment for services rendered by the workers involved in trading or slaughtering livestock.

Whenever a full day of slaughter was planned, workers would arise early and start a fire using wood from the mesquite trees. Mesquite is a hardwood tree between 20 and 50 feet tall, which is indigenous to Texas and grows readily in the open range. The burning of mesquite wood imparts a sweet flavor to grilled meats. On ranches, the fajitas were placed directly on the coals.

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Fajitas were placed directly on the coals because there is skin-like membrane on both sides of the meat. After a few quick turns, the meat was taken off the fire and the membranes were removed by peeling. In those days, cattle were thin and had little fat on them so the membranes kept the juices in the meat and prevented it from becoming dry. Often, the fajitas were wrapped in freshly made corn or flour tortillas and called "tacos de fajitas."

One account of the introduction of fajitas was given by a cowboy who worked on the King Ranch in the 1940s. In those days, cattle roundups could last 3 months. Usually, two to five cattle were slaughtered daily to feed the 70 cowboys involved. The jefes (bosses) always had first priority for the inside belt "la faja de adentro" and for the tenderloin.

Some south Texans, because the skirt remained on the rib section of the carcass, claimed that the skirt was the best part (most tender) of the rib. Because of this, the value of the skirt increased when it was removed from the rib cut and sold separately.

It is believed that the meat now called "fajitas" has been cooked and served in the form described above for a long time, but it has not always been called by that name.

## Marketing

Traditionally, the beef skirts were thrown away or ground into hamburger meat. As the popularity of fajitas increased, outside skirt steaks increased in price from 49 cents per pound in 1976 to between \$1.79 and \$2.79 per pound in 1985. Now, meat buyers for supermarkets and restaurants are unable to buy enough outside beef skirts to satisfy the demand. Wholesale prices for outside skirts continue to rise. The main reason for this is that the demand for outside and inside beef skirts in Japan has risen sharply during the last decade. Japanese are now buying 90 percent of America's production of beef skirts. Because beef skirts are classified as variety cuts, they do not fall under beef quotas set by Japan on American beef.

Demand for beef skirts is expected to increase as consumers in other parts of the United States discover fajitas. If this happens, U.S. consumers will have to outbid the foreign competitor—Japan—to obtain this meat.

Beef skirts labeled as "fajitas" are now moving north. One major retail store is marketing fajitas from Seattle, Washington to Washington, D.C.

## Inside Versus Outside Beef Skirts

In the wholesale meat trade, beef skirts are marketed as inside or outside skirts. However, the cut is often labeled "skirt steak" at the retail counter. Most beef skirts sold at the retail level are inside beef skirts.

Although inside or outside beef skirts are not identified in the store, there are palatability differences between the two kinds of meat. Research conducted at Texas A&M University revealed that outside, in comparison to

inside, skirts are more tender and have higher overall palatability ratings--a composite of ratings for flavor, tenderness, connective tissue, incidence of off flavor and overall palatability (Table 1). Also, outside skirt steaks require less cooking time than inside skirt steaks.

Although significant differences in palatability exist between inside and outside beef skirt steaks, these differences can be eliminated by mechanical tenderization, such as cubing or pounding, which breaks down connective tissue (gristle).

Cubing to tenderize the inside skirt is accomplished by chopping across the grain on the diagonal in two directions as illustrated in Figure 1. Hold knife with one hand on the handle and the other holding the dull side of the blade. Chop, making marks in one direction, then repeat in the other direction, making a criss-cross pattern on the beef skirt.

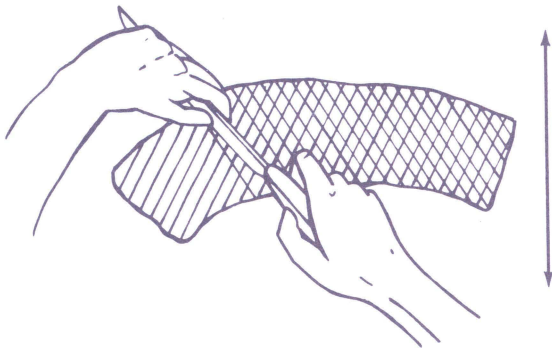


Figure 1. Inside beef skirt steak being cubed by chopping across the diagonal in two directions.

Marinating in a food acid such as lime juice, lemon juice or vinegar for several hours or overnight before cooking can increase tenderness and enhance the flavor of the inside and outside skirts.

Table 1. Mean palatability ratings for inside and outside beef skirts.\*

Location	Juiciness	Muscle Fiber Tenderness	Overall Tenderness	Off Flavor	Overall Palatability
Inside	5.62 <sup>a</sup>	4.69 <sup>a</sup>	4.48 <sup>a</sup>	3.77 <sup>a</sup>	4.92 <sup>a</sup>
Outside	6.17 <sup>b</sup>	5.94 <sup>b</sup>	5.73 <sup>b</sup>	3.63 <sup>b</sup>	5.63 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>ab</sup> Ratings with a superscript letter "b" are more desirable than those with a superscript letter "a."

\*Ratings of 8 mean extremely juicy, tender and palatable. Ratings of 1 mean extremely dry, tough and unpalatable.

## Served South Texas Style

The Hispanics who worked many of the south Texas ranches made the fajitas palatable by tenderizing them through beating against stones, marinating in lime juice for several hours and grilling over mesquite coals. Then the meat was cut across the grain into strips and wrapped in a flour or corn tortilla. Traditional condiments added to the sizzling fajita were: pico de gallo ("rooster's bill or tooth"), a spicy relish made of onions, green chiles, tomatoes and cilantro (fresh coriander plant known as Chinese parsley); picante sauce, a hot tomato relish; sour cream; grated cheese; chopped green onions; and guacamole.

Fajitas contribute to a nutritious meal plan because they contain foods from several groups. There is no way to determine the exact portions of the food groups for a fajita, because that depends on how many fajitas you eat and how much of each food is used. The estimated nutritional value of various fajita ingredients is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *The nutritional value of a fajita.*

Ingredient	Food Group	Nutritional Value	Calories
tortilla	bread-cereal	carbohydrates B-vitamins other nutrients	68 each
beef skirt	meat	high-quality protein vitamin B-12 heme iron other nutrients	73 per oz.
grated cheese	milk-cheese	calcium other nutrients	55-75 per oz.
pico de gallo	fruit-vegetable	vitamins A and C other nutrients	negligible
picante sauce	fruit-vegetable	vitamins A and C other nutrients	negligible
guacamole	fruit-vegetable	vitamins A and C other nutrients	45 per ¼ cup
sour cream	other	fat	45 per 2 Tbsp.



Fajitas  
 Corn or Flour Tortillas  
 Pico de Gallo or Picante Sauce  
 Sour Cream    Chopped Green Onions    Grated Cheese  
 Guacamole

## Fajitas\*

1-lb. beef skirt, flank or round steak (cut ½-inch thick) Juice of 2 to 3 limes 1 to 1½ tsp. garlic salt ½ tsp. pepper	4 flour or corn tortillas, warmed 1 large tomato, chopped 3 green onions, chopped Guacamole Dairy sour cream
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Trim excess fat and gristle from steak. Pound steak to ¼-inch thickness. Place steak in plastic bag; sprinkle both sides of steak with lime juice, garlic salt and pepper. Tie bag securely and marinate in refrigerator 6 to 8 hours (or overnight). Drain marinade; discard. Broil steak over medium-high mesquite coals 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Carve into thin slices. Serve steak in warmed flour or corn tortillas; add picante or pico de gallo sauce, guacamole and sour cream as desired. Makes four servings.

\*Reprinted with permission of the National Livestock and Meat Board.

## Margarita Fajitas\*

1½-lb. beef skirt, flank or round steak, fat trimmed ¼ cup tequila ½ cup lime juice 1 cup cooking oil 1 Tbsp. liquid smoke 1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce	¼ tsp. pepper ½ tsp. salt ¾ tsp. paprika ½ cup chopped green onions, including tops ¾ cup chopped green pepper 1 cup chopped tomatoes 8 to 10 6-inch flour or corn tortillas
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Slice partially frozen beef steak into long strips, thinner than a pencil. Marinate 2 hours with mixture of tequila and lime juice in flat glass dish. Drain.

Combine oil, liquid smoke, Worcestershire sauce, pepper, salt and paprika, beating with rotary beater until smooth. Heat wok over medium high heat, add the oil mixture and swirl wok in circular motion. When hot, add steak strips, stirring occasionally. Three or 4 minutes before steak is done, stir in onion and green pepper. When done, ladle onto hot plates and top with chopped tomato. Let individuals wrap them in warmed flour or corn tortillas. Serves four. Preparation time: (excluding marinade) 35 minutes.

\*Used with permission of 1984 Texas Beef Cook-Off Second Place Winner, Jean Connor, Palestine, Texas and Texas Cowbelles Association.

## Picante Sauce I

2 large tomatoes  
6 green chiles  
1 clove garlic  
½ cup chopped onion

1 tsp. cayenne pepper  
1 tsp. cinnamon  
6 sprigs cilantro (optional)  
Salt to taste

Peel tomatoes. Roast and peel chiles; remove stems and seeds, or use canned green chiles. Grind tomatoes, chiles, garlic and onion together until fine. Add vinegar and spices. Store in covered jar in the refrigerator.

## Picante Sauce II

1 16-ounce can stewed tomatoes  
2-4 medium-sized fresh or canned  
jalapeños, stems removed  
1 tsp. garlic powder  
1 Tbsp. white vinegar

1 tsp. salt  
½ tsp. sugar  
1 small onion, coarsely chopped  
6 sprigs cilantro (optional)

Combine all ingredients in a blender and blend about 30 seconds. Store in covered jar in the refrigerator. Serve with tostados as an appetizer or with Mexican foods such as fajitas during a meal.

## Pico de Gallo

### “Rooster’s Bill or Tooth”

½ cup chopped green onions  
1 serrano pepper  
½ Tbsp. corn oil  
1 5-ounce can tomatoes with green chiles  
1 fresh tomato, chopped

2 medium avocados, chopped (optional)  
Juice of 1 large lemon  
Salt  
Pepper  
6 sprigs cilantro (optional)

Combine all ingredients, and chill for 1 hour before serving. This can be served as a salad, appetizer or accompaniment to fajitas.

## Guacamole Salad

3 large ripe avocados  
1 ripe tomato  
Salt to taste  
¼ tsp. garlic powder

2 Tbsp. picante sauce (optional)  
2 Tbsp. onion, minced  
4 green onion tops, chopped  
Juice of ½ lime

Avocados mashed with garlic, lime juice, spices and salt may be served with tostadas or any crisp cracker or used as an accompaniment to fajitas.



## Beef Contributes Valuable Nutrients

**Protein**—Nutritionally complete protein containing all eight essential amino acids in ideal proportions to maintain tissues and for energy.

**Phosphorus**—For strong bone maintenance.

**Iron**—Heme, the most useable form of iron, comprises 60 percent of the iron in beef.

**Riboflavin and Thiamin**—As part of enzymes to release energy from food.

**Niacin**—For healthy nerves.

**Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>**—Prevents anemia.

**Fats**—For energy and to satisfy appetite.

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